

Lesson 5

Proper 18

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 18:1–20

When Cain killed his brother Abel and was confronted by God, he tried to excuse himself from responsibility by asking, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” However, God’s second basic command is “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” In the family of man, we are responsible for one another just because we are God’s creatures together. In the Christian family, the Body of Christ, we have even greater reason for responsible, caring love for one another: we together have been redeemed by Christ, and His Spirit lives in us. (See 1 John 4:19–21.)

66. “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” What does asking the question reveal about the questioners? How did Jesus deflate any such indications of self-importance in the Kingdom?

67. How did Jesus emphasize the importance of responsibility for the spiritual welfare of our fellow Christians? How did He show that Christians should go to any length to avoid willful sinning ourselves?

Jesus repeated His gift of the Keys of the Kingdom, bestowing the authority to represent Him in human interaction on all of His disciples. He shows us that sometimes, love for a brother or sister in Christ has to be “tough love”—love that admonishes and corrects and, we hope, restores the erring. This is why our Lord “places the solitary into a family,” also in the context of the Church. We are not alone as Christians; we have brothers and sisters with whom we are one Body in Christ.

In that Body, we love to use the “right-hand key” to assure one another that we are forgiven. But sometimes also the “left-hand key,” which binds the sins of the unrepentant to them, must be used. The practice of church discipline and its goals are clearly spelled out here. It is always to be person oriented, more concerned about restoring erring people than about issues. But it is indispensable to the Christian community. *Disciple* and *discipline* are basically the same word and cannot be separated as we follow Jesus.

68. “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault.” What kind of sins are included in this, and what kind of sins are excluded in applying Jesus’ instruction?

69. The sin may be public, an offense to the whole Body of the Church, and not just a sin against an individual. Give an example of an obvious sin of commission and of an obvious sin of omission that would require bold, personal, loving admonition.

70. Why is the first step always to be “between you and him alone”? What happens if this first private step is bypassed and others are involved immediately? What does “If he listens to you” imply? To what have you “gained your brother”?

If he will not listen, taking one or two with you adds weight.

71. Who would these “one or two others” probably be in the life of a congregation? Who are “the church” to whom a refusal to repent is to be reported?

72. What does it mean for the Church to treat the stubbornly unrepentant “as a Gentile and a tax collector”?

Excommunication, after persistent, loving admonition, simply recognizes and makes clear to the sinner that unrepentant sin is a sinner choosing to be lost and rebuffing the Seeker. It is the most powerful application of the either/or demands of the Gospel.

“If two of you agree . . . , it will be done for them.” *Symphonein* means agreeing after having rehearsed and discussed a matter sufficiently.

73. Is this an open-ended promise that God will do whatever two Christians might agree on?

74. What is the source of power behind this agreement of the Church in prayer?

The Old Testament Lesson: Ezekiel 33:7–9

The Old Testament prophets generally were called by the Lord to address the people of Israel during ebb times in their religious and moral life. The prophets brought a message of judgment against perfunctory religious practice and against social injustice and, at times, had to speak out boldly against outright idolatry and the immorality that idolatry encourages. They called God’s chosen people to repentance and to living, personal faith. Their message always included assurance

of the Lord's faithfulness to His covenant promise that would be shown in His acceptance and blessing of a repentant people.

Ezekiel was God's prophet to the people of Judah during the Babylonian exile. He had been part of the first deportation, and during the seven-year period that followed, while Jerusalem still stood, he continually warned that its doom and destruction would come. When the city was destroyed and more exiles joined them in Babylon, Ezekiel's message became one of encouragement. The danger for the exiles was that they might lose hope of restoration, settle into life in Babylon, and forsake their national and covenantal identity—and many did. In this pericope, Ezekiel is designated a watchman and is warned to live up to the resultant responsibilities. The preceding verses give a general picture of a watchman and his responsibilities. (See 33:1–6.)

Ezekiel is called "son of man" by the Lord. This is not the usage of the title that Jesus drew from as He referred to Himself as "the Son of Man." That was drawn from the messianic thrust of Daniel 7:13–14.

75. What did "son of man" emphasize about Ezekiel?

76. What principle is established by the Lord's words to Ezekiel about his calling as a prophet and a watchman? Is it a fair and true principle?

77. What does this principle say to us regarding the Christian witness we are to bring and the brotherly concern we are to have for one another?

78. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 13:1–10

The remarkable thing about Paul's words is that they were written at a time when Christians were beginning to experience persecution by Roman authorities, who eventually declared Christianity to be an illegal religion. Their doing "what is good" was not always bringing them commendation. Sometimes they lived in fear and terror of the authorities. Paul himself would suffer martyrdom under Emperor Nero. Here Paul did not write just a sociopolitical critique of the Roman government of his day. He gives inspired instruction regarding Christian attitudes toward governing authorities of all times.

79. How are Christians to look at the role of government?

Martin Luther spoke of God's two hands. His right hand is the Church, through which He reaches out in mercy to humanity through the Gospel. His left hand is governmental authority, through which He uses power to ensure the stability of society. Both are God's hands at work, and it is important that their functions not to be confused or mixed. Governing authorities are not intended to dispense mercy and forgiveness, but to maintain order. The Church is not to use power to force people to become "Christians" or their societies to impose Christian morality, but is to preach the Good News of Jesus. Paul's calling the one in governmental authority "God's servant for your good" is made even more striking by his calling public servants "ministers of God," *leitouroi*, a word usually reserved for those who are giving service and offering sacrifices as priests.

80. Is it generally true that one who does what is good as a law-abiding citizen does not need to fear those in authority? What do you do when governing authority becomes oppressive and exploitive of those it is supposed to serve?

81. What is "the sword" that is borne by governing authorities? What effect does it have on society when authorities use the sword as "the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer"? What happens when this is neglected or misused?

82. What higher motivation do Christians have to obey laws and support government? (See 1 Peter 2:13–17.)

83. When is it necessary for Christians to disobey authorities? (See Acts 5:29.)

84. How is agape love "the fulfilling of the law"?

Lesson 5

Proper 18

*O God, from whom all good proceeds, grant to us, Your humble servants,
Your holy inspiration, that we may set our minds on the things
that are right and, by Your merciful guiding, accomplish them;
through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with
You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 18:1–20

66. A question like this reveals the questioner’s feeling that he himself might qualify as the greatest. Jesus said we must become humble, dependent, and trusting—like a little child—to be great in the Kingdom. His words here apply directly to little children but may be properly extended to include “the least of these” (Matthew 25:40) and “the little ones” in the Kingdom. The kind of responsibilities that He points to here apply not only toward children but toward all of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

67. Jesus pronounced His “woe to the world for temptations to sin”—for that will be the universal experience of the world. But He pronounced a specific “woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!” We can’t hear that from Him without feeling His judgment of an individual’s bad behavior that may encourage bad behavior in others. If they cause us to sin, hands and feet are to be cut off and thrown away, and eyes are to be plucked out and thrown away. Extreme measures—and even if followed literally, they won’t eliminate the problem of temptation and sin. But Jesus surely is telling us to do whatever it takes to avoid willful sinning!

Responsibility for the spiritual welfare of others leads to a focus on the use of the key that binds sins and closes heaven to the unrepentant. We need to see this as the necessary concomitant of the Gospel if we are going to take the either/or nature of the Gospel seriously. (See Hebrews 10:26–31.) How could we possibly see a brother or sister committing spiritual suicide without reaching out to rescue him or her?

68. Personal admonition can be applied only to evident sins of commission or omission. It must never be a judgment of attitudes or motives or lack of faith. We cannot judge nor pointedly admonish what we cannot see.

69. Evident sins of commission: a man in the church leaves his wife and lives with another woman; a young church member lives sexually with another without being married; a man carelessly and habitually uses God’s name in vain; a woman is a habitual gossip about the faults of others. Evident sins of omission: persistent neglect of the fellowship of worship and communing; failing to contribute financially.

70. Only when the admonition is personal and private does loving concern for the erring person come across. Talking *about* instead of talking *to* changes personal concern that seeks the welfare of the erring into gossip at the expense of the erring. “If he listens to you” implies his acceptance of your admonition, his repentance, and his correction of the sinful situation. When that happens, you

have gained him again as your brother—to stand beside you and all Christians as repentant sinners who live under God’s grace in Christ.

71. Taking other members with you as witnesses to confirm your interaction with the one being admonished is based on Deuteronomy 19:15. If the matter finally must be taken to the church, the testimony of the witnesses will be a significant factor. In the life of a congregation, these witnesses would probably be elected elders of the congregation. The church has to be the congregation on the local scene, people who know the accused and the situation, people who care personally about the one who has been admonished.

72. Gentiles were not part of the people of God; tax collectors were Jews banned from the synagogue because their working for the Romans was seen as defection from the covenant faith. “Gentiles and tax collectors” had become a proverbial phrase to indicate one who was not part of the community of faith.

Excommunication, when properly carried out, is not “kicking someone out of the church” but is formal acknowledgment of the fact that a person, by his actions, has left the faith and the fellowship. Martin Franzmann says in *Follow Me*,

The “three steps” prescribed by Jesus are anything but legal prescription and casuistry. . . . These are merely the clear-cut expression of Jesus’ will for the fellowship of His disciples: the will, namely, that no sinner shall be needlessly degraded, that no sinner’s fate shall be committed to the subjectivity of any one man but shall be the concern of the collective love and sobriety of the whole church, that the new people of God shall remain a pure people of God, pure in virtue of the effective divine forgiveness at work in its midst. (pp. 153–54)

73. The agreement of the two must be based on the instruction of the Word regarding the will of God, and their prayer must be that the will of the Lord be done.

74. The source of power in any gathering of God’s people and their effective agreement in prayer is the presence of Jesus and their desire to implement His will in all of their considerations and actions.

The Old Testament Lesson: Ezekiel 33:7–9

75. Daniel’s use of “son of man” has messianic and eschatological significance. The Lord’s calling Ezekiel “son of man” emphasized his humanity as a finite creature called to represent the Infinite One. He was to faithfully bring the message he was given. Like all prophets, apostles, pastors, and teachers, he was in “sales,” not in “management.”

76. The principle enunciated is the responsibility of the spokesman to bring the assigned message without regard for its acceptance or rejection by those who hear it. A faithful watchman who sounds the alarm is not responsible for those who ignore it; an unfaithful watchman who does not sound the alarm is responsible for those who are lost because they were not warned by him. This surely is true and fair. Someone who has found the formula that would provide a total cure of all cancers but does not make it available to the world would be responsible for the deaths of those he might have saved, but that does not make him responsible for those who are offered the cure and reject it.

77. Christians have God’s total cure for sin and hell. Are we not responsible to God for proclaiming the Good News of Jesus and making the cure available to all? As Christians we are one another’s “keepers.” We must sound the alarm when someone’s relationship with Christ is being deadened by willful sin or persistent neglect!

78. Ezekiel was to be a faithful watchman, bringing warning to his people as appropriate—and Jesus said, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault.” We are not just to “mind our

own business” but in Jesus’ name to look to the true welfare of those around us. (See Philippians 2:1–4.)

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 13:1–10

79. Paul taught here that governmental authority is not just a sociological development, but is God’s determined will for humanity and, as such, is God’s representative. We are to look at properly constituted governing authorities as God’s representative for our good.

80. Generally it is true that the law-abiding need not fear the authorities, but there are always exceptions to this in which the innocent may suffer injustices. Under the modern concept of “government by the consent of the governed,” citizens act to remove oppressive, exploitative governments—by the ballot if possible, but by more forceful means if necessary. But Paul’s inspired counsel should make Christians hesitant to become quickly involved in civil disobedience or revolution—suffering wrong rather than doing wrong. “Those [authorities] that exist have been instituted by God” is definite, but so is “he is God’s servant for your good.” Governments may reach the point at which they are not God’s servants for good and must be opposed and replaced.

81. “The sword” is authority from God to be His agent in forcibly punishing the evildoer. The *machairan* was the short sword of a Roman soldier. Paul was beheaded with such a sword. Capital punishment, applied dispassionately for serious crimes such as murder, is surely included in the concept of “the sword.” When used justly in application of the law, “the sword” helps to maintain a peaceful society; when it is neglected or misused, society becomes unstable and lawless. The tendency in a society such as ours to see people as “essentially good” will frustrate and negate God’s will and purpose for governing authorities and bring all kinds of evils into the society.

82. “For the sake of conscience,” respect for God and His representatives motivates us to obey laws and support government—not just fear of the consequences of disobedience.

83. Clear commands of God in His Word always have priority over conflicting commands and laws of human authorities.

84. Agape love always consciously seeks the welfare of others. Paul mentions the various commandments to show that all of them fit under the umbrella of loving the neighbor, and thus agape love fulfills the great demands of the Law.